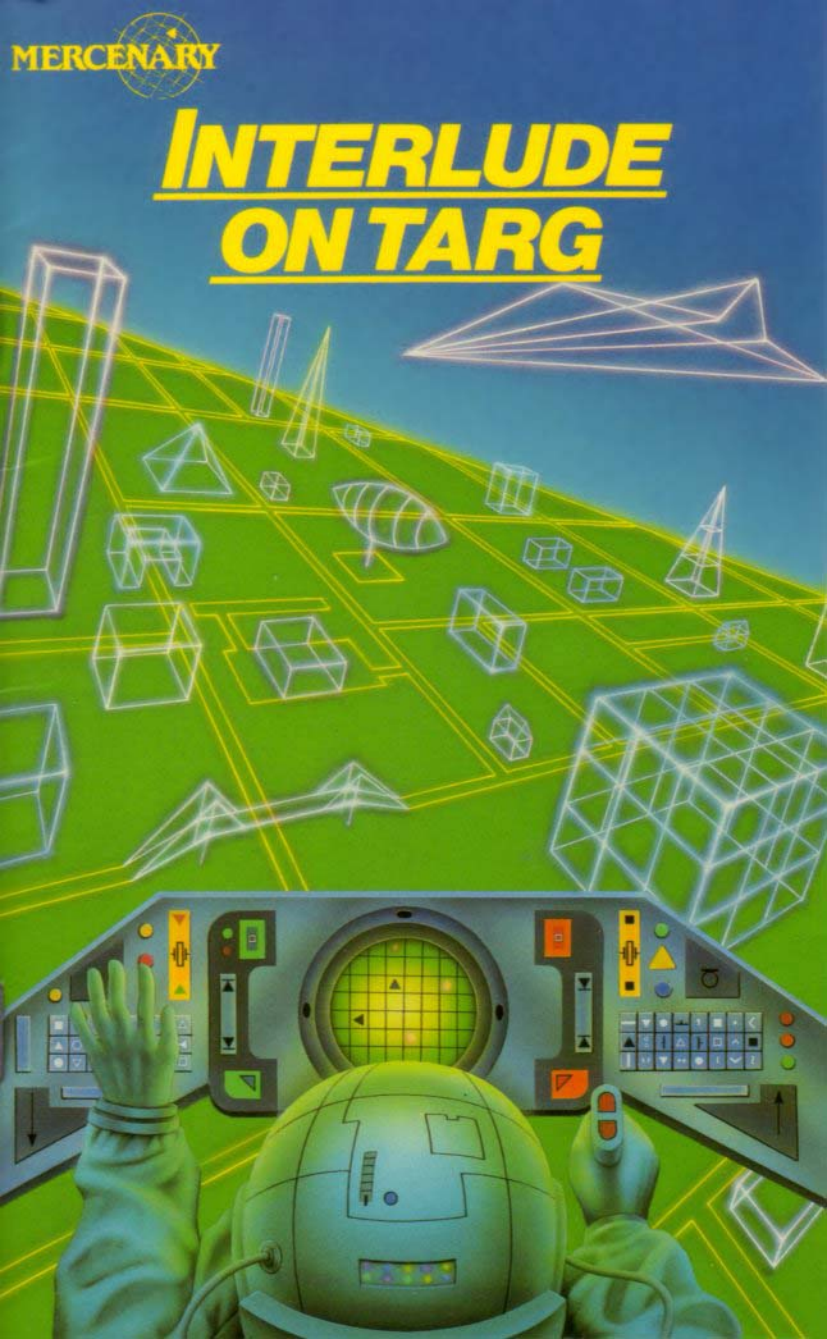
MERCENARY

INTERLUDE ON TARG



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ESCAPE FROM TARG

THE COMPUTER GAME
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There was one final act, and I could not have left without trying. It was not my fight, but Dia had been the closest friend in my time here. His loss, and in such a pointless way, had been a great shock.

Of course he had been foolish to enter Threlian space for any reason, but in pursuit of romance...

As I heard it, he had barely crossed their threshold when he was taken.

It was Prerob that had interrogated him aboard Frontiersman 7. With his interview-craft he must have known Dia's incursion was harmless.

Obviously a direct attack was out of the question.

I gained clearance to Threlcenter on the pretext of attending for interview. Naturally, I would never work for them. So my direction on return was from well within their space. This was enough to have Frontiersman off guard.

Predictably, they despatched two Surveyors on my final approach and gave me the one-shot window I needed... That zonal missile had cost virtually

all of my remaining credits, but it was worth it!

The fight with the Surveyors was tough—over two hours. We do bear the scars.

Now I am free to leave, although I'm not at all sure about the job at Gamma-Five. The terms are good. And they 're staking me. I shall not know fully until I get there, but I understand it's some kind of undercover work. They certainly wanted someone from out of galaxy, and Amiga is new to me.

I would not, for choice, be moving on from Stellaurion. There have been some very good times over the past six years.

I came to the galaxy in a quantum leap from Milkay with a firm belief that the century should not turn before my fortune was made. And every opportunity was here at Mycrecia, with freightways being expanded through to the Borgian system under threat of Emtu piracy.

We were a team of independents supported by a network of intelligence of a quality that only results from enthusiasm and reward. We were part of a commercial explosion that spread wealth generously to its supporters. We paid for our pleasures with lavish spends as though it would never end.

When it did, we knew that we had failed to recognise the onset of stability — that point at which we were to cease to be part of the system.

Our work was done.

Of course, I still have Prestinium, and a fine reputation to match, but only three years to realise my ambition. The prospect of 2100 (Milkay), and my declared return home, now looms large.

Returning to the immediate prospect, I prepare Prestinium for flight to Gamma-Five by instruction to Benson, my PC. Checking spacemap data, Benson reports that there is a safe direct course. I confirm that

he has control.

3 - 2 - 1 - 0. The Novadrive Countdown is complete.

A powerful burst of energy kicks us forward. Benson embarks on a routine damage control report. With the Novadrive engaged, the journey should take 3.7186 hours.

You may wonder at that, expecting maybe four or five times longer. But Prestinium is a Class Seven and powered by Pulvin. Under Novadrive, we outpace all; well, excepting some specialist-built jobs that is.

That was my greatest moment, when I collected Prestinium. Four years ago now.

There were a few extras to the standard spec. like autoroute. But actually, with Prestinium-type in short supply, extras were factory-fitted to build the price.

In any event, once I'd got the Credits, I was pleased not to have to wait. This one was on consignment to the Mycrecian dealership when I first enquired.

I did have some delay with the Novadrive being delivered late. Worth the wait though.

I must say, on my first few missions with her, I was very nervous. Not for the speed and handling, as you might think. I knew that these were far superior to my Interstellar, although I must admit side-drift could be a problem on overprop. I did have to get used to the sheer power. But it was the price that had troubled me. So much at stake. Twenty times what I'd paid before.

Then I came up against Novabill.

He looked to take me for sure.

In retrospect, I knew the routine.

But what a surprise!

I was pushing back to base when Benson screamed alarm. There was this shot, not microseconds away. I shied instinctively. At that velocity and that thrust-90, any other craft would have lost it; would have spiralled.

Novabill could have taken repast before launching a droid and still hit us before recovery.

As it was, Prestinium handled beautifully.

After that, I realised. That's what I had paid for; response as one.

This is not a luxury status craft. For four years now, I've enjoyed the best fighting base there is. Used every feature. Never been beaten.

Benson reports some conflict damage. Not surprising — the Threlian Surveyors had been well armed and almost up to their task. There's no problem. Prestinium has on-board facilities and I'll soon have these minor hull blemishes ironed out.

I do it so many times!

Of course I should say 'Benson will.....'.

Benson is such an extension of myself, I cease to think of it as other than me.

It wasn't always so.... We've always had in-helmet PC's, but before Benson's generation, they were really just an extension of our instrumentation.

We had mass handling for two generations before the ninth, so that's not new, although the ninth did add 47Kv of capacity, (and still nowhere near enough).

The communications features go without saying.

The major revolution was Benson's screen-up. I appreciated that from the start.

Now, I almost never revert to direct visual in the helmet. It took some getting used to, I have to say. At first I began to think I really was being transported through solids. Of course the logic is simple. I target for A to B travel, and Benson makes the necessary minor corrections in avoidance, while representing my A to B progress.

When I did get used to it, I then became complacent in combat, forgetting to switch-out. And you do need to. You can't change your mind and have a Benson

over-run adjusting for your previous direction. Benson knows that too, but by the time he may take to revert to manual, all could be lost.

But these were minor difficulties compared to his cussed nature. And I say 'nature' advisedly, because this was the feature added to the ninth by the parapsychologists.

It's perverse really, but in my view, the thing we like least in others is what is in ourselves. And this is what the ninth are constructed to do.

For best response, they need to 'know' you. I suppose the learning process was worst. He was coy, almost to the point of inactivity. But enough of that. Suffice to say that after eleven years, he does know me, and reciprocally, me him, to the point that I think of him as me

We have one difference. I have to sleep. And I need that right now. It's several periods since I rested properly and with everything in Benson's hands, I can take a full seven minutes induction. Then I really will have to spend some time learning about our destination for really I know nothing about.....

'EMERGENCY!'

Benson's panel screams to life.

Benson has detected an incompatible course and has been unable to revert to setting. There's a guidance system fault. A collision course computes. I hear the Novadrive disengaged as Benson reports;

'UNABLE TO CORRECT'

All power is being deployed to maximum reverse thrust.

'CRASH IMMINENT!'

Scanning Benson's screen-up of the looming landscape, I'm somewhat overtaken by events. Benson must be completely confused as I note him returning Prestinium to manual control.

'YOU CRASHED' says Benson, with a clear inference that all preceding events were under my control.

It's that kind of daft remark with which he annoys me the most. I'm about to give him some verbal input when it occurs to me that, whilst indeed we have crashed, we have both survived.

Benson is rattling on with a Status Report, including the news that Prestinium is destroyed.

We have crash-landed on Targ. There is a state of war between the Palyars and the Mechanoids.

I know something of the Palyars. Indeed, who doesn't with a Pulvin-powered craft. And their story is a school syllabus must in demonstrating ordered economic advance.

Up to three centuries ago, they were a model democracy who saw great merit in scholastic achievement. Their influence, in fact, extended throughout the Pyrenium system, their great philosophers being most welcome at any seat of learning.

Benson tells me that the Palyars are of humanoid type, with an average height of 2 metres and life-expectancy of about 150 years.

I've never been there, but I understand their home planet Attelar is very beautiful. Over years of stability, there has been a steady growth of towns and cities developed with fine architecture.

Pulvin crystal, plentiful on Attelar, had long been used by the Palyars to fuel interplanetary flight. It is rumoured that the process to refine the crystal into a powerful fuel was discovered by accident. It matters little. Palyar fortunes were made.

They did have the foresight to buy up Domatar, a nearby planet, and Casperium at the other end of the system, both conveniently uninhabited, and the only other two known sources of Pulvin.

The process has remained a closely-guarded secret. With Pulvin fuel, demand has always exceeded supply, even though the Palyars have supplied only friendly powers and never knowingly permitted military use.

The main production plant was built on Domatar, where there are only moderate amounts of crystal. To avoid tearing apart Attelar for the vast quantities required, Casperium, richest of all in Pulvin, is intensively mined.

Transporter fleets have operated for over three centuries between the mines and the factory planet Domatar. This, Benson advises, is why Targ, this remote backwater planet, was occupied by the Palyars. Targ became a way station and resting point for the transporter crews.

With their ever-increasing wealth, the Palyars expanded their colonies. Targ in particular, presented a wonderful opportunity for Walton, a promising young architect. He was commissioned to develop Targ Central City in its entirety on a greenfield site. His brief was to create a resort for rest and recreation.

Walton's imaginative style is apparently the hallmark of this place.

We should take a look.

As I step out of Prestinium, I can see that all is lost. You can imagine my desolation. I shan't dwell on it. That will get us nowhere.

Benson continues on our status: We are located near an airbase with a Dominion Dart most conveniently parked on the pad.

Benson has received a message that the craft is for sale at 5000 Credits and seems to favour me buying it. A most reasonable price, I must say.

I don't think my finances can have been so low since I was first logged on with Interbank. My net worth of 9000 Credits is all that remains from the seven figure

sums that featured at Mycrecia. And in my business, there are no venture credits.

I have to rebuild the figures here on Targ, or here I stay!

This Dart is good value, but I have a new set of values to consider now. My welfare is at a premium.The means of my survival is finance, without which, how can I achieve anything?

The Dart is a useful craft, notably for short surface hops. It has good manoeuvrability, particularly so with the hover facility. Weaponry is standard manual targetry grenades of no sophistication, but in plentiful supply. Benson takes control of more than enough for anything we're likely to encounter here.

Benson registers an attacking Palyar ship.

It appears that we have upset the Palyar Commander's brother-in-law.

I select a speed of 300 and gain 1200m altitude in time to see the threat; a droid missile approaching fast.

The Dart outpaces it as I reverse away keeping it in view. I fire and miss this relentless attack missile.

Sweeping left and gaining altitude fast before the droid reacts, I regain it in view below. I race down as it homes in on me, giving me a one-shot chance, taken and won.

The droid is destroyed and Benson perceives no further response.

The Palyars are clearly excitable. A droid isn't particularly lethal but efficient it certainly is. Are they truly incensed, or just measuring my ability?

As I fly around everything seems very normal except that I can see no signs of life. And if there's war, I would expect to see some damage. But no, the planet is beautiful.

Have these Mechanoids annihilated the Palyars?

I know nothing of them, so I instruct Benson to

report from data file. Benson expands detail on the aggressor:

The Mechanoids were originally built by the Megascam warrior race to be indestructable front-line troops functioning as vicious attack machinery. The Megascam have operated for many centuries in the perpetration of war.

Their researches provided the means of a most dramatic expansion of activity. They mastered instant intergalactic communication.

I have thought before that it is perhaps regrettable, but true, that a war environment provides the best incentive and support for technological advance. This would certainly seem to be so with the Megascam.

I was not aware that instant communication was possible.

Benson continues:

Still unexplained and beyond the comprehension of all, a simple organism, the empathy bug, defies all known and presumed 'laws' of physics. A relatively simple life form, but with a lifespan of 900 years, a single parent bug produces a twinned offspring. These twins can be separated by the vastness of space but remain in empathic communication with each other in response to light-induced stimulii.

Megascam mastery of organic chemistry interfaced this amazing phenomenon with their highly-developed funrater technology. (I make a note to have this definition expanded).

The Megascam capability to communicate instantly over vast distances gave them centrally co-ordinated control of their war effort. By the deployment of Mechanoids, the Megascam ran operations across vast areas of the Amigan galaxy without the requirement to be in physical attendance.

The Mechanoids were given a learning ability which

enabled them to master environments beyond the experience and knowledge of the Megascam.

The Mechanoids are structured with an efficiency typical of the Megascam. Once in control of a territory, only one unit is required to remain in physical occupation after victory.

CM transenders are implanted at the site of all Mechanoid captured locations to report on any localised hostile action to the remaining resident Mechanoid. By instant communication then to the central control, a defence response is initiated, locally by droid missile or, if of sufficient gravity to so require, the return of massed forces of Mechanoids.

Such was the Megascam success, that in 50 years their Empire embraced half of the Amigan galaxy.

Tribute flowed from thousands of territories to the twenty most idyllic planets selected by the Megascam for their own occupation in conditions of unbelievable luxury.

Wealth was set to flow in for ever.

Their 'home' planet, Bootin, was by now the least popular posting for the Megascam warriors.

Sensing a threat to its well-being, the Mechanoid central control funrater relayed some concern to that elite group of Mechanoids whose depth of experience had taught them the most.

A coup ensued, very simply with Mechanoid occupation of Bootin and the twenty Megascam colony planets.

The Megascam, whilst totally unprepared for this unexpected turn of events, called for help from those elder warriors who had previously been discredited as alarmist for questioning modern complacency.

Unable to treat with the Mechanoids, whose sense of self-preservation prevailed, and ill-equipped to re-occupy Bootin, the Megascam elders re-grouped in

occupation of the planet Pyrenia in the Stellaurion galaxy, at a presumed safe distance, to plan war on the Mechanoids.

I decide that it is time to explore thoroughly.
Benson has tuned to the local LOCREF Trans and records our crash site at 08-08.

I fly to an altitude of 12000m and looking back see that Prestinium has created something of a landmark.

Of course the Dart has limited power restricting us to altitudes of around 18000m. Away above, I can see some sort of craft and below, from this height, I can see the complete city road network.

Benson has pulled in communications identifying this as Targ Central City which apparently abounds with tourist attractions. There are times when I might have been happy to come here.

As it is now, I would prefer to leave.

I fly Blue 90 to West and then Green 90 to East to establish that our first LOCREF runs West to East 0-16 in defining the city limits. Green 0 to North returning Blue 0 to South registers our second LOCREF 0-16.

Benson tells me of Walton, the architect of Central City, who must certainly have had a tidy mind. At

virtually every LOCREF intersection is a building or structure including some beautiful designs.

At 12-03, I marvel at Sabin's Cube, the 19th Wonder of the Universe, so Benson tells me.

Moving North-West we overfly the Moorby Arch to Tyler Point and West to the Walton Monument. Benson recites detail as we go, and my impression is that this could indeed be a fascinating place to explore, given that we were here as tourists.

Benson pulls in some info. being broadcast on Intrans Pgs 1437 and 1721 that would provide the fullest itinerary of events — theatre, exhibitions, sport and tours. There's clearly none of this on now.

I check Servitrans channels, and these aren't working. No hotel reservations for us!

We pass over the United Planets building at 01-00 and I am reminded of happier times when mortals had high ideals. I expect, with some cynicism, to see the bureaucracy still working on—but they're not there.

Turning South, I see movement ahead. I accelerate on to join another Dart flying calmly over the landscape. Benson perceives no threat and I watch in some disbelief this sign of life. What is its purpose?

'JOB OFFER'.

We are receiving an invitation from the Palyars to attend a briefing in their complex at 09-06.

I fly East and there it is—a Pipnet elevator.

Of course, I should have thought before!

Whilst it's quiet above ground, City services may be functioning underground.

I land at the centre of the cage and engage the elevator. The hangar below is empty. I leave the Dart to explore.

The complex arrangement is fairly familiar. Many communities support their cities from below, often using functionaries for routine work. It's a thing

regular visitors never see, but in my job.....

In a room just off the hangar, I find some objects lying around. Walking on through corridors, I arrive at the briefing room. Again no Palyars present, but Benson picks up the localised communication in which they outline their proposals.

Seems to be a variety of work on offer; a trip to their Colony Craft, capturing a Mechanoid and shooting up sites under Mechanoid control.

I am not too well prepared for this work. I don't know my way around, or what's about, or where to go. I'm not even equipped to reach their Colony Craft, assuming that is what I saw up in the sky. As for the Mechanoids—well they haven't done me any harm yet.

I'll need to know a lot more about Targ before I decide what to do.

Next door to the briefing room is a bank, and I am reminded of my measly assets of 9000CR.

This has to improve.

I look around some more and return to the hangar.

Just through a door at the far side, I find a door that's locked. A thorough search is going to prove tougher than I thought.

Exploring the complex further, I find more locked doors, but I do eventually find a door-shaped object that is a key which I take under Benson's control.

Returning to the original obstacle, it all proved worthwhile. Behind the locked door, I found a Power Amp. Just what I need! Having this with me on board the Dart will improve its performance. It will give us the range we need to reach the Colony Craft.

Further along from this room, there's a Communications Room, but Benson tells me it's not working.

Along the corridor is a transporter room. I've seen these before and I'm pleased that they're in use here as they do help in getting around. This one is two-way

in operation, so I take a return trip just to see that it's working. And it is. I'm not interested in where it takes me at this stage, as I need to explore the 09-06 complex first.

I'm not going to bore you with the details, but I've spent hours exploring below Central City.

I'm sure I haven't covered it all, but I'm beginning to piece together the transporter room network. Some are just one-way and you don't know until you step in them whether you're at the receiving end (in which case you don't go anywhere) or at the sending end (in which case you can't readily get back) and there's a set of transporters, apparently two-way, which take you on a mystery tour.

The mystery is where you're going to come out next.

In my travels, I've come across darkened rooms, although I've now got an emitter to overcome that; I've found further locked doors, more keys, and a host of objects. And I've encountered a Mechanoid!

There in the complex at 03-00 was a Mechanoid. This chap seemed fairly passive, although I suspect this was because the Mechanoids also wanted to trade with me, along similar lines to the Palyars.

I haven't committed myself yet.

With all that's going on, I feel that I'm being set up somehow. There's a game that's going on, and really, I have to play along, and play well.

How else can I escape?

I need to go and investigate the Colony Craft. But I'm going to save that. I need some rest.

If Targ is a tourist haven, there must be somewhere nice to go and relax. I can't imagine that it will be in the complexes, so I go and retrieve the Dart.

Taking information from Intrans, I select the Coach and Horses at15-02 as my most favoured venue.

Apparently, Walton had this thing about the Earth

planet culture and was a frequent visitor there. I've been there too, (well it is in Milkay) although I do have mixed feelings about the place. However, this establishment, the Coach and Horses, does represent one of its best aspects.

I find the place well-stocked. This has clearly proven a most popular retreat in Targ tourist times. The tariff lists mega prices, but there's no-one here to charge me. I sample a few of the refreshments on offer. I'm particularly fond of this amber liquid.

As I relax, I recall Benson's earlier reference to 'funrater technology' when telling me of the Mechanoids and Megascam. I call for an explanation.

Benson appears somewhat reticent but goes on to relate that, whilst he represents the essence of crystal technology in computers, there are other devices that have been developed along separate lines.

In this case, the name 'funrater' was derived from their defined purpose as function operators. In keeping with Megascam prowess in organic chemistry, funraters are structured organically.

The 'memory' function is performed by memsels, a single cell structure that reproduce themselves by division every 7—15 hours. Such an arrangement is 'managed' to meet a flexible processing requirement. Existing knowledge is reproduced and can be separately enhanced, or replaced, with new information.

This process is directed by other more complex organisms termed 'mappers' who maintain an appropriate organisation of memsels to provide an ever-changing and developing memresource potentially approaching infinite capacity. The mappers order their 'flock' by directing fine pH adjustments to elemental areas of the memsel 'soup'.

Local Input/Output is interfaced through vibra-tuned crystalline metal whose segmental-matched

pairing acts as a remote terminal send/receiver.

Each Mechanoid is funrater-equipped to provide its local learning facility and is in empathic communication with its central control.

Benson is poised to relate further, but I instruct 'hold' while I digest the concept.

I can see now what an excellent system the Megascam had established; for as long as the Mechanoids remained under their control.

They had it made, with their frontiers pushed forward, adding more and more territories; and tribute. All achieved by their technology, which became almost automatic in its operation.

But what was the strength of the system was also the weakness.

They allowed the Mechanoids to learn too much.

It could have been the amber liquid mixed with my feelings of frustation, but as I left the Coach and Horses, I was in a playfully destructive mood.

I fly South-West

No action at Slade Airport. And there's no action at Sabin's Cube now. My shot at the base brings about a stunning collapse as I relegate the 19th Wonder of the Universe to a pile of rubble.

I zap a canopy structure on the corner of Pinafore and Globe. Benson records a droid response.

The Palyars are on to me.

A bridge ahead over Concord splays beautifully.

Should I pot the Pipnet?

I think not.....As I ponder, the Palyars catch up with me. We're into a dogfight. The persistence of the droid angers me, and this time I go in pursuit.

It nearly gets me on the turn, but I am quicker.

It's all great fun.

This area must be under Palyar control. They want me to have a go at the Mechanoid sites. But how can I

tell which is which? It's too late finding out after I've shot up the site. I've done the damage then; without knowing to which side.

Bosher Stadium tumbles. No tennis player could have brought the house down like I just did!

I laugh, for the first time on Targ, as I recognise the symbol of my old adversary Novabill. He'd sell his grandmother for five credits.

Just imagine my pleasure as I collapse his monument.

Even Benson manages a 'well done'.

That does it. My spree is over and I feel happier now. I suppose I've damaged my chances here on Targ, but we shall see.

It's a short flight to the Colony Craft. With the benefit of the Power Amp, I wind up my speed to 9900.

I can't see that there's anything on Targ for the Mechanoids. They don't need territory to occupy and they certainly don't need Targ's rest and recreational facilities.

They can only be here for reasons of strategy. I suppose, with the Megascam H.Q. now on Pyrenia, not too far from here, the Mechanoids are progressing through Stellaurion in that direction.

I wonder if they still occupy the tribute-yielding territories previously held for the Megascam. They probably do, as I wouldn't think it was in their nature to give up anything.

For their part, the Megascam must have plans to re-take Mechanoid Central Control on Bootin. It would be the only way for them to respond. They couldn't be on the defensive for ever.

I suppose the prize is there for anyone who can take it. Have control of the Mechanoids, and stay in control, and they'd work for you.

All that wealth there for the taking!

That would make my fortune.

Back to reality and the present prospects: Are the Palyars defending Targ alone against the Mechanoids, or are they in alliance with the Megascam? They would make strange bedfellows, the peace-loving Palyars and the warrior Megascam.

Stranger things do happen.

But if the Megascam won it all back, that would include the new teritories now held by the Mechanoids. It would be a large foothold into Stellaurion in addition to Amiga.

At 65000m, here it is; the Palyar Colony Craft.

Routine shielding, powered by energy crystal but impervious to my grenades. Safe from the Mechanoids too. They're territorial warriors only. Of course they deploy through flight, but Benson tells me they've just never learned space combat and do not have shield-piercing armaments.

If I still had Prestinium, what would that be worth?

There's a landing pad on top of the craft. I park centrally and elevate down to the hangar below.

Doors leading off are locked, but I've collected the key to these on my travels.

A search of the top floor reveals some facility rooms, and a transporter room with a warning sign on the door. I think I'll heed their warning at this stage.

Taking the elevator to the floor below, I find the kitchen devoid of food. I'll do the washing-up later.

I move next door to the Exchequer. I see from the graph on the wall that things aren't moving too well at the moment. But I get an offer of purchase at 100,000CR for the gold that I couldn't resist picking up earlier. Good value that.

The Bank opposite confirms my balance of 109,000CR and I'm getting the picture on the Palyar's 'requirements'. A Conference Room and an Interview

Room complete the facilities on this floor, but still no-one about.

The bottom floor confirms that the Palyars have left. In what should be a hub of activity, the Control and Engine rooms, nothing.

I check out a transporter but it's a one-way arrival point. Could provide a quick way up for delivering the goodies.

I take a couple more useful objects on board and resist the temptation to defy a clear 'No Entry' warning. If I've got my orientation right, it's more of a 'No Exit'.

Back to the City, and with something of a conscience on my previous indiscriminate destruction, I use a new found item objectively to put the clock back and repair Bosher Stadium, resurrect the bridge and recreate the canopy.

I fly on then to Sabin's Cube and hit the fire button once more. With this fascinating mode of 'anti-weaponry', I witness a spectacular restoration of the 19th Wonder.

I should have restored my standing with the Palyars too.

Novabill is left collapsed.

Should I take time out now for some fast action? Some planning and some earning first, I think.

Choosing Centrepoint Airport as a convenient place to store some of the useful objects that I've collected, I beaver away knowing more of what I am after.

I find the Mechanoids generous in some respects.

A merry-go-round of transporters, my inquisitive and acquisitive nature operating to the full and I feel I know what I'm doing. There's enjoyment in these engaging tasks. If someone's playing a game, I'm playing it too.

After repairing the Communications Room, I learn

of the horrendous hire fee required. I'm 90,999CR short at present, but I'm sure a further trip to the Colony Craft will yield me that. But I'm not inclined to spend so extravagantly.

Nice to know I can leave, but if there's another less expensive way out, I'm taking that.

And there it is!

A few more hours of search and I've found it. An Interstellar craft sitting quietly in a hangar.

It's often been said that I take too many risks by being inquisitive. But this time it's paid off. And too good a chance to pass up!

The craft is short of a Novadrive, but I've seen this on my travels. I didn't take it at the time, as Benson was at full capacity.

A quick transporter link, and I retrieve it.

In the adjacent hangar, I find the Concord craft. Useful, as I hadn't brought transport with me and I'm ready to go back to the Colony Craft.

Flight in Concord III is a nice experience; a bit ponderous on the controls, but very smooth. During my time on Targ, I've sampled a few vehicles, even the utility Hovercar out at Jordan Airport. I've tested the Sprintcar. Terrific performance, and I have that in mind for a job before I leave.

The Hexapod, apparently used by the Mechanoid, really was weird. I'm not used to saucer-craft and this one was no exception in making me giddy.

A lucky find was the Casper Hanley Eagle. This must be a development kraft as I found it under wraps. Superb handling, it has its own on-board Power Amp.

I've used that one most while I've been here.

Do you know, I'm really getting quite fond of Targ, perverse as that might seem. It must have been a fun place for the Palyars. Shame they had to leave. I would have liked to have met them.

The Credits tumble to me as I tour their Colony Craft. I'm beginning to feel quite well off.

Why are the Palyars being so generous? And the Mechanoids? Their leader did demand that I put him down, but I don't suppose he meant here.

Perhaps I should feel guilty in taking advantage of both sides. But this is my survival.

As I relax in the Palyar Conference Room, they even allow me some essential light refreshment. Benson reminds me that I had previously held from receiving full info. on funraters. Yes, let's have it.

Benson proceeds with some relish to tell me of a suspected fault in this alternate technology:

It is believed that a finite point can be reached by exceptional input calling for more memresource than can be generated within the memsels reproductive cycle.

A long quiet period reduces the meresource. Really intense activity then could suddenly call for more than exists. It is believed that the mappers would 'white-out' for a short period at such a point.

I realise that if this happened, it may provide just long enough for the Megascam to re-take control. They could have some means. It is, after all, their technology. It occurs to me that I may have seen signs of this potential shortcoming. When I hit a Mechanoid site, they don't always respond.

I've found the facility to identify Mechanoid sites through Benson. I could really get the Mechanoid funrater moving, and the Palyars have offered me a good reward to do just that.

I am now sure that I've identified the Palyar function in alliance with the Megascam:

Along with many such allies, who will be similarly placed to the Palyars, they all contrive to put the Mechanoid Central Control under pressure. That would account for the situation here.

The Palyars were well-prepared. They have set up events here on Targ. My activity provides a response to the Mechanoid usurpers. The Palyars have flown. I have enabled their escape, most likely back to their home planet, Attelar.

The Palyars well appreciate that they are no better off if the Megascam re-take control. Targ is lost to them either way. The Megascam in control would not yield territory. The Palyars must have taken the opportunity of my arrival to fulfil their function. In this way they avoid Megascam retribution for desertion, which was likely had they otherwise have shown signs of leaving.

It's all too much for coincidence.

Did the Palyars in fact have everything to do with my arrival here? Do they have that power? I have little

choice but to play their game.

I wonder if they will honour all of their promises. It seems to me that taking their hire ship could have been the most risky way off Targ. I might still then be under their control. The essence of my life is the freedom to choose the action.

I'm going to take the Interstellar ship that I've found, but must first maximise my earnings here.

I fly down to Centrepoint Airport, where I've left the Sprintcar, and climb aboard.

I drive over to 00-00 as a logical starting point and on the way check that Benson's panel is reporting on CM transender locations.

I rate this vehicle. I'm going to suffer an onslaught of Mechanoid droid attack. But if I can keep my speed up, maintain direction and be sure of my aim, I could win through.

Here we go.

I have topped a hundred direct hits as I turn at 00-14. I hear the droid fire intensify as I make the turn. They home in on me just as I accelerate up to 480 and we're away again on the final laps.

'WE ARE MOST PLEASED'.

'YOU HAVE DESTROYED ALL OPPOSITION SITES'.

Benson relays the Palyar pleasure and records their reward. They certainly keep their promise.

As I drive back to 03-15, I contemplate the Palyar position.

They've kept faith and paid me, even though I have in effect been their prisoner. My Credits now total 1,909,000. Could I have done any better?

This is certainly enough to regain me some measure of independence: That is, if the Palyars are really prepared to give me my freedom. Might they not wish me to aid their defence of Attelar? Or do they see me

involved further in the Megascam struggle?

What has been the outcome of my time here?

Have I, in concert with others elsewhere, defeated the Mechanoid Central Funrater?

As I pass by the twin hangars from Rignall Road, the real starting point of my tasks, I wonder if there's anything else that I should take with me to help in the future. Should I really bury the hatchet with the Palyars?

Will they let me go, or have they further tricks to play?

I board the Interstellar craft with some trepidation, but all does appear to be functioning.

As we pull away from Targ, the message starts;

'CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ESCAPE FROM TARG'.

Apparently, the Palyar Commander's brother-in-law is pleased to see me go.

He's not the only one!

Epilogue

So here we are, dear reader, free from our interlude on Targ. As I understand it, you may be involved in similar experiences to mine. If that is so, I do wish you the best of luck.

I've told you of my time there in a way which I hope will provide some assistance, but without spoiling your fun. I imagine we're all the same when telling a tale of our success. We make it all sound so easy.

To be honest with you, I've had my mishaps on Targ. For example, I didn't tell you that, just when I had found the Antenna after a long search, I picked it up and promptly backed through the 'skull and crossbones' exit from the room.

I've had to quit the action a few times. Usually after being hit from behind by a droid that I'd forgotten I'd excited. And of course that sort of thing loosens Benson's hold on any items being carried. After some bitter experience though, you can learn how to minimise the impact of such events. A bit of forethought, and you can save yourself from all sorts of problems.

Once I began to master things, I really did have some fun in some funny ways. Like when I drove the Hovercar off the top of the Colony Craft. How did I get it up there you may ask? You may! Suffice to say that, with Benson's help, I've managed to discover all sorts of odd things that can be done.

There was that transporter with the warning sign. That threw up a whole new game. But there's lots more I could tell—hopefully we'll stay in touch.

As it is, I'm making good progress now towards Gamma-Five. And this Interstellar craft is OK. Benson's been locking in to the on-board facilities. We seem to be free of any further involvement with the Palyars and the Mechanoids; although I suppose that in this life, nothing, but nothing's, for certain!

Prestinium is en route for Gamma-Five.
Benson's panel screams EMERGENCY!
There is a guidance system fault.
A collision course registers.

The Novadrive is disengaged. Power is deployed to provide maximum reverse thrust. A crash is imminent.

In what is potentially a final act, Benson returns Prestinium to manual control...

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